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Philosophy Upside Down?

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Abstract

Philip Kitcher recently argued for a reconstruction in philosophy. According to him, the contemporary mainstream of philosophy (in the English speaking world, at least) has deteriorated into something which is of relevance only to a few specialists who communicate with each other in a language nobody else understands. Kitcher proposes to reconstruct philosophy along two axes: a knowledge axis (with a focus on the sciences) and a value axis. I discuss Kitcher's diagnosis as well as his proposal of a therapy. I argue that there are problems with both. I end with an alternative view of what some core problems of the profession currently are.

KEYWORDS: applied philosophy; Philip Kitcher; pragmatism; reconstruction in philosophy; scholasticism.

In a recent contribution to *Metaphilosophy* Philip Kitcher argues that there is something deeply wrong with contemporary mainstream anglophone philosophy and that we should “reconstruct” philosophy “inside out” (see Kitcher 2011).¹ Kitcher expresses some caution with respect to both his diagnosis and the proposed therapy (see 249); he is happy to admit the vagueness of some of his remarks (see 254; see, e.g., some passages on 252 and 254) and even remarks that much “of what I have said is probably crude, simplistic, and wrong” (258). He continues: “Yet I don’t think that the errors and the need for refinement matter to my plea for philosophical redirection.” (258). I think we should follow Kitcher’s lead here and not worry too much about the details (it is not clear anyway which of the more detailed claims Kitcher is more committed to and which less). I think

1 If not indicated otherwise, page numbers refer to this article. See also some of the recent discussion about Kitcher’s paper at <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/04/kitcher-on-reconstruction-in-philosophy.html#comments>.

there is a lot to agree with in Kitcher's paper but also a lot to disagree with (and not that much "in the middle"). His diagnosis as well as his proposal of a therapy are both quite radical and provocative – and a welcome chance for a conversation about the state of the discipline. Both diagnosis and proposed therapy deserve a closer look and discussion. I will start with Kitcher's diagnosis of the problem with current mainstream philosophy (1) and continue with a discussion of what Kitcher would suggest to keep as the wheat and what to throw out as the chaff (2). Finally, I will – in the way of preparation of an alternative diagnosis – raise a couple of more concrete and more relevant questions about the current state of the profession (3).

1. The status quo

According to Kitcher, the current mainstream of anglophone philosophy considers Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Language and Philosophy of Mind to be central while everything else tends to be regarded as peripheral (see 249, *passim*). Kitcher proposes to question mainstream priorities and even to take steps towards a "reconstruction in philosophy" which would treat at least some of the areas and topics currently seen as peripheral as more central and some of the areas and topics currently seen as central as more peripheral (see 249). "Central" is to be understood as "of high importance" while "peripheral" is to be understood as "of low importance".

In this context, it is interesting to look at the fictional tale (248-9) which opens the article: In the past, pianists would perform the works of Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, Ligeti, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Prokofiev while nowadays they specialize in mere technical exercises. I take it that the intended analogy with philosophy is neither that the anglophone mainstream neglects the interpretation of the classical thinkers in favor of technical exercises nor that the philosophers favored by Kitcher can be compared to Bach and Co. while contemporary anglophone mainstream can only be compared to third-rate pedants. The point is rather that the mainstream has lost the sense of what's important in philosophy and focuses way too much on unimportant technicalities (more on this below). One could interpret the tale and some of Kitcher's remarks in an even stronger sense:

The mainstream has lost and given up philosophy for mere technicalities. I take it that Kitcher does not want to go that far.

Several questions arise even at this early stage of the diagnosis. Consider the diagnosis of the preponderance of Metaphysics & Co in the mainstream. What about ethics? Does it not belong to the mainstream of anglophone philosophy? It's hard to see how one could deny this. One would also like to know where Kitcher's own main field of philosophy of science falls here: How much of it is wheat, how much of it chaff? Apart from all that: On the basis of what data can Kitcher defend his claim that the four areas he mentions form the official core? For instance, on April 11, 2011, 5:30pm, the well-known webpage for online papers in philosophy PhilPapers (see <http://philpapers.org/>) lists 92,742 entries for *Value Theory* (listing *Aesthetics, Applied Ethics, Meta-Ethics, Normative Ethics, Philosophy of Gender, Race and Sexuality, Philosophy of Law, Social and Political Philosophy and Value Theory, Miscellaneous*) as opposed to 63,709 entries for *Metaphysics and Epistemology* (listing *Epistemology, Metaphilosophy, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Action, Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Religion and M&E, Misc*, excluding *Philosophy of Science* with 63,096 entries). These numbers as such do, of course, not show much, and they are only numbers. But this may serve as one illustration amongst many of the reasons why one might wonder what Kitcher's evidence for his main claim is.

Apart from that, it might be wiser to describe the mainstream not in terms of the strength (in whatever way measured) of certain areas but rather in terms of topics dealt with within what nowadays often count as the different areas of philosophy. Or should we perhaps rather describe the mainstream in terms of kinds of approaches to philosophical problems and questions? It is very hard to even figure out what the relevant categories are for an adequate description of the philosophical mainstream at certain places at certain times.

But let us get closer to the "core" of Kitcher's analysis. Following up on Dewey, Kitcher makes two interesting points which should be understood as specifications of the general diagnosis. First, philosophical problems arise from problems that many people have, not just the few specialists of mainstream philosophy: "The danger that a field of inquiry will become a 'sentimental indulgence for a few' – or perhaps a site of intellectual jousting for a few – is

especially urgent in the case of philosophy.” (250) Second, mainstream philosophy has developed a “technical language” which is problematic. The two points are clearly related to each other and to the diagnosis of the loss of importance (at least according to Kitcher but cf. also Eklund 2013, 288): The truly important problems of philosophy are problems that many people have and they can and should be dealt without using technical languages of specialists (see 250).

Kitcher says very little about what determines the importance of a philosophical question or problem. Related to that: It is also not quite clear whether Kitcher thinks that philosophical problems originate in the non-philosophical problems of the many or whether he thinks that the problems of the many are already philosophical in nature. Interpreting as well as agreeing with Dewey, Kitcher remarks: “At each stage, the philosopher’s first task is to recognize the appropriate questions that arise for his contemporaries.” (252). And, a bit earlier in the paper we read: “Pragmatists will think of areas of inquiry as making contributions to human lives, and suppose that those areas are healthy only if they are directed towards delivering the things expected of them.” (249-50) Some remarks further down in the text (see below) suggest that philosophy is legitimate insofar as it contributes to the solution of problems which are not philosophical as such but which can be dealt with with the help of philosophy. Kitcher distinguishes two “axes” for the direction of philosophy (again following Dewey): the enterprise of acquiring factual and scientific knowledge and the enterprise of identifying value (see 253). Philosophy has a legitimate role to play insofar as it contributes to these two non-philosophical projects. On the first he remarks that the lack of answers to, say, epistemological questions “does not seem to matter very much. Inquiry goes on, often delivering valuable results. It is far from evident that it would go even better if especially clever philosophers settled these issues once and for all.” (254). On the second project Kitcher remarks that value inquiry is driven by very practical problems and that the solutions are technical solutions to technical problems (see 256-7, especially the talk about “social technology” on 256-7).

One major problem with this view is that it threatens to instrumentalize philosophy. Ethical problems are in great danger of being reduced to technical problems and ethics to social engineering; the special normative nature of ethical

problems seems to get lost. There is an important question about what counts as a good or acceptable solution. It is such questions that an instrumentalist attitude cannot deal with and that requires some philosophy of the traditional kind. Kitcher's pragmatism is in danger of collapsing into sheer and slightly crude instrumentalism. A similar diagnosis results from the consideration of philosophy as the "handmaiden of science". One wants to protest and stress that whatever philosophy can contribute to all kinds of non-philosophical projects it also has non-instrumental value in itself. We want to "understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term", as Sellars once remarked (Sellars 1963, 1). Isn't that legitimate? Isn't it, for instance, a very legitimate question whether we have reason to fear death, apart from very practical and even technical questions about our own mortality? And what remains of the critical reflective distance so crucial to good philosophy if it is nothing but a servant for everyone else? Again, not to be misunderstood: Philosophy has a huge role to play for all kinds of non-philosophical projects (hasn't, for instance, the development of logic contributed to modern computing?). But that is not its only legitimate role. Understanding things in Sellars' broad sense is as important. This whole dimension of philosophy gets lost if one sees it driven by external demands and problems. Here is a remark that seems to express this view of philosophy: "Yet unless one can show that the more abstract questions do contribute to the solution of problems of more general concern, that they are not simply exercises in virtuosity, they should be seen as preludes to philosophy rather than the substance of it." (259).

However, it is not quite clear whether Kitcher really wants to go for this kind of instrumentalist pragmatism about philosophy. The alternative is to accept that the problems of the many are already philosophical problems. This is very plausible anyway. One does not have to be a philosopher to think seriously about death, the nature of morality, whether our view of the world is partly determined by us, etc. However, if this is rather Kitcher's view of the nature of philosophical problems, then he needs to be more explicit about the criteria of importance. What makes one problem a real one and one just an apparent one? Is it that some problems are formulated in technical language while others aren't? Is part of the

problem that almost all of contemporary mainstream philosophy is inaccessible to the lay person?

Kitcher criticizes a “scientist” defense of the use of technical language in philosophy: Like science, philosophy deals with problems by specializing and focusing on small sub-problems and this requires a technical language. Kitcher objects that the analogy with science does not hold: Philosophy does not seem to ever get beyond the stage of disagreement and controversy (see 251). This might be true but two questions remain. First and on Kitcher’s own terms: How can philosophy fulfill its alleged pragmatist tasks if it doesn’t reach agreement and consensus? Second, even if one agrees that philosophical discussion does not lead to agreement, one doesn’t have to admit that technical language is illegitimate. Perhaps it is necessary for other reasons? A more detailed understanding of a certain issue often forces one to use technical terms that are not or not easily understandable by lay persons. Does that make the use of technical jargon illegitimate? Do further developments of philosophical problems always have to be accessible to the untutored person? The issue of the lack of agreed upon solutions to problems is a red herring here: It concerns both “pedantic specialist” philosophy and ‘broad brush’ philosophy. The question how far we should go with the attempt of a detailed understanding is an independent one.

There is another, related but different set of problems which are more serious: How can one avoid that philosophy, as practiced by professional philosophers, loses all contact with the general public as well as with other disciplines? Should philosophy be a profession in the first place? How should it be “institutionalized”, if at all? It is certainly true that philosophy cannot be self-sufficient, even if one focuses on the internal aim of understanding things in general. This is too huge a topic to be dealt with in any detail here. I just want to make a few hints. First, it helps if professional practitioners of philosophy talk more to both the general public (philosophers have a place on the media when it’s about, say, justice in health care) and to practitioners of other disciplines.² Second, teaching philosophy at institutions of higher learning is very important and makes

2 Sometimes one can get the impression that it is the most grandiose and unintelligible philosophers who appeal most to the interested parts of the general public (e.g., in parts of contemporary continental Europe). One should never forget that philosophers can also do some damage when they go public.

a contribution that is often overlooked in these times of cutting or closing down departments in the Humanities. Third and as a contrast: Another idea is much more problematic, namely the idea of the philosopher as the kind of public intellectual who is considered to be an expert or authority on political issues. Laudable as Sartre's and Russell's political engagement against the war in Vietnam might have been, they did not have any special authority as philosophers on this.³ The question what the role of philosophers or other academics in the public realm can or cannot be is a very tricky one. It is regrettable that Kitcher does not go (more) into these more concrete questions and problems.

Finally: What about art, for instance music? Couldn't a music lover argue that modern music after Schönberg has become an "indulgence for the few", that music has become a rather technical "language" for specialists and that it has no importance for the many? So, Lady Gaga instead of Ligeti? And how about the other arts? Many people do indeed make these arguments and they seem structurally close to Kitcher's points about philosophy. Would Kitcher not say these things about the arts? Why not? A defender of modern music would point to the great value these forms of art have. The fact that it's only appreciated by few people and that it's not easily accessible does not seem to matter (or not that much) in the case of the arts. Why should these things matter (or matter that much) in the case of philosophy? How can one ask "Why philosophy?" but not "Why music?"? Why do people complain about the "uselessness" of philosophy but not about the "uselessness" of music? Like music – one might say, exaggerating a bit – philosophy is useless but important. Ultimately, the questions are about value and not about technicality or indulgences for the many or the few.

2. The Wheat and the Chaff

What are the alternatives Kitcher has in mind? Where are his hopes as far as the reconstruction of philosophy is concerned? He mentions a couple of examples: "Philosophers of the special sciences, not only physics and biology but also

3 Complete retreat from the public is also no option. Helmholtz was up to something when he called the philosophers of his time "impotent bookworms" ("impotente Bücherwürmer"; see Helmholtz 1986, 131).

psychology, economics and linguistics, are attending to controversies that bear on the future evolution of the focal field, and sometimes on matters that affect the broader public.” (258) This sounds very instrumentalist again and I refer back to the remarks above. Kitcher continues and mentions political philosophers who deal with modern democracy and multicultural societies as well as ethicists who deal with new technologies or global poverty; he also mentions questions of “race, gender, and class” (see 258). Nothing against Applied Ethics, on the contrary: It was high time that philosophers became more specific. But we certainly don’t want to collapse everything ethical into applied ethics. Applied ethics without normative ethics and meta-ethics is blind (and meta-ethics plus normative ethics without application is empty). Kitcher mentions social epistemology as another laudable tendency. But does that mean that we shouldn’t also continue to do “individual epistemology”? Why not? Kitcher continues: “Within aesthetics, attention has been paid to connections between art and politics, and some philosophers have followed Stanley Cavell’s pioneering work in exploring the philosophical significance of major works of music, drama and literature” (258). Cavell is certainly not one of the more accessible contemporary authors – shouldn’t that be a problem for the friend of a type of philosophy that is accessible to the many? And what, for instance, could be meant by “the philosophical significance of major works of music”? Literature and drama are hugely relevant to philosophy. But that certainly does not mean that literature is philosophy or philosophy literature or that they are the same “anyway” (e.g., because of the lack of clear borderlines). The relation of art and politics has been and is a big topic in History and Art History. What would be the specific philosophical contribution here? The few examples Kitcher gives are very sketchy and it is not clear to me what exactly he has in mind when he thinks of activities relevant to the reconstruction of philosophy. Kitcher’s general remarks about the role of philosophy along the two main axes also remain rather sketchy (see sec. 4 and 5). One big question in the background remains to be answered (by all of us): What can and should one expect from Philosophy?

Answers to questions? Help with the theoretical and practical problems in life?

One also wonders what exactly Kitcher has in mind when he thinks about the specialist, technical and unimportant philosophy of the few. Unfortunately, Kitcher is not specific at all here. What exactly should we move to the periphery of

philosophy when reconstructing it? Where, for instance, does the long, traditional debate about the ontological status of universals fall? Or Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories? All the work on the Liar Paradox? Philosophers' views on weakness of the will or on the possibility of moral dilemmas? The hundreds of thousands of pages on Locke on secondary qualities? Recent discussions of consciousness or intentionality? Or about truth-conditional semantics or the indeterminacy of translation? Or personal identity? Or different philosophical interpretations of probability? Sure, one might say that at least some of these topics are part of other disciplines (logic, linguistics, etc.) and not "pure" philosophy but on the basis of what understanding of philosophy can one say that? This move is limited in scope anyway and cannot be applied to many of the examples just mentioned. Furthermore, examples can be multiplied. Most of them, like the selection above, concern technical problems not easily accessible to the lay person. Kitcher does not go into concrete examples but I think he should have: If one does, one should get worried what remains of philosophy as we know it after its reconstruction. Lots of things dear to almost all philosophers (are they all wrong?) would have to be pushed aside if not thrown out.

What remains? Boring broad brush philosophy à la "Man and Cosmos", generalist waffle or pseudo-deep unintelligibility like in some of Heidegger's post-WW2 writings (see, e.g., Heidegger 1947)? We should avoid all this as much as pedantic scholasticism or the fetishism of mere technical exercises. Philosophy is, amongst other things, an exercise in finding an equilibrium, for instance between waffle and scholasticism. The difficulty of finding the equilibrium is a serious one and constitutes one of the reasons why philosophy is so hard.

3. Concrete Issues

In the meantime we should also continue to think about more concrete questions. What level of specialization or detail do we need for a philosophical understanding of a given topic? Couldn't there be too much? How can we tell? And isn't the situation in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences similar (perhaps even in the natural sciences)? How many historical micro-studies of early industrialization in selected regions of early modern Europe do we need? How

many interpretations of some badly neglected author of the 8th century? How many sociological analyses of skate-boarders in Seattle? These questions about the role of detailed inquiry are different from questions about specialist language of the few. And the issue is not whether we should allow for or favor detailed investigations but rather what kind of detail is useful and when. Things are further complicated by the well-known unpredictability of the consequences and results of inquiry: What looks like an unimportant detail can turn out to have important spin-offs (and what looks like an important question can turn out to be of minor importance after all). The discussion about knowledge after Gettier's famous article (1963) is a good example: Some of it might be very tedious and not really necessary for anything worth wanting but some of it has led to important new ideas about knowledge (and the social epistemology Kitcher favors has partly developed out of externalist responses to Gettier).

There is also the problem of boredom. Pick any topic in philosophy (or other academic disciplines) and do an extensive review of the literature – can you escape the sense that more than 90% of the reviewed literature is repetitive and not very interesting in itself? Don't well-known sociological factors make us publish too much - too much that need not be published? And how much of the published literature in a field is read by more than one person who is not also a friend or collaborator of the author? How much is read by, say, 3 strangers? So much writing with, I suspect, so little reading! On top of all that, we have to admit that many of us, most of us, repeat ourselves quite a bit in our publications. Who doesn't do that? But what would we say about a painter who mainly does variations of three or four paintings? Or a composer who rewrites the same piece again and again? Why do people mind this kind of thing in the case of art but apparently not (so much) in the case of philosophy?

Finally: there are questions about power and influence in the profession.⁴ Who can and who can't start a new debate and on the basis of what? How and why do debates come to an end? What questions are we invited to ask, and are there questions which are excluded (if yes: how?)? To what degree do citation and

4 One should mention that the profession has in recent decades become much more aware of issues concerning race, gender and class (though the latter seems to be a bit in the background at the moment).

reading cartels exist in Philosophy and, if they do, how do they function? What is the role of fads and fashions in philosophy and, if they play a major role, how do they work? How are traditions built and continued or interrupted and destroyed? Is the life of our profession really always that close to reason and argument?⁵ These are just some of the questions we need to ask more often and pursue in much more detail.

The above are just a few hints as to what neglected questions concerning and problems of the profession are. Many of these problems are not purely philosophical problems and cannot be solved by a reconstruction of philosophy, whatever its direction and content. Their solution requires different kinds of non-philosophical resources. One shouldn't blame certain philosophical views or attitudes for problems that have much more to do with external factors. If one thinks contemporary mainstream philosophy in the English speaking world is not focusing enough on the truly important problems, then one has to explain in some detail what's important and why. It is not enough to refer to the "jargon of the few". What we need much more than a philosophical reconstruction of philosophy is some empirical analysis (by social scientists) of the way the profession works. On the basis of that and of an idea of what Philosophy can be we can then proceed and think about what's good, what's not so good and how we can change things for the better.⁶

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- 5 It would also be good to have more discussion about certain quantitative methods of research evaluation or about the very idea of rankings as in Brian Leiter's "Gourmet Reports" (the possibility and nature of evaluative comparative judgments is an important philosophical topic anyway; see, e.g., Chang 1997). Given the impact such types of evaluation have in the profession, one has to wonder whether the alternatives are really all worse.
- 6 I am grateful to Philip Kitcher for a very helpful exchange about his paper. I would also like to thank Mark Goodwin, Hugh Lacey, Hans Oberdiek and Darrell Rowbottom for comments on my paper as well as discussion of Kitcher's paper.

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